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1952

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"Mr. Pickwick"

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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NEW YORK MIRROR
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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"Mr. Pickwick"

Journal American

September 18, 1952

A Highly Rewarding And Professional Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

MANY have tried and few, if any, have succeeded in bringing to the theatre a proper dramatization of Charles Dickens' immortal Pickwick characters. But I think that Stanley Young's effort, "Mr. Pickwick," which was presented by the Playwrights' Company at the Plymouth Theatre last night is the best attempt to date.

This is a brilliantly mounted and superlatively performed production and if the vehicle seems at times to be strung together with Scotch tape, if situations develop unexpectedly from left field and the whole thing stops for intervals of pure Dickensian declamation, it can be forgiven on the basis that the old master was first of all a genius of characterization and not a playwright.

Bearing this in mind I think Young has done an extremely competent job of injecting life into these memorable figures and moving them around within a radius which even the most ardent Dickens fans cannot strenuously resent.

• • •

Shadow Odyssey

TAKING AMPLE liberties with the original, the author has managed to contrive a shallow little odyssey which leads Pickwick through a complication with his landlady, a costume party at the home of Mrs. Leo Hunter, a painfully involved love hassle featuring the ubiquitous Jingle and the obsequious Misses Wardle, the whole thing climaxing in the famous breach-of-promise trial which occupies much of the concluding second act.

The large cast is consistently superb. It would be difficult to imagine a more accurate and engaging Pickwick than George Howe's skillful interpretation; Nigel Green, as Jingle, is delightfully droll and unscrupulous and the Wellers, pere et fils (Clive Revill and Louis Hector), furnish a consistently comic background, bouncing the domestic philosophies of the period back and forth during most of the evening.

Jacques Aubuchon, as Buzfuz the lawyer, is sufficiently pompous and stuffy and Estelle Winwood makes a large score with the relatively meagre part of Mrs. Hunter. Sarah Marshall is decorative and diligent in the role of Mary.

• • •

JOHN BURRELL has directed the proceedings with precision and a keen sympathy for the hallowed characters, yet maintaining a sense of movement and action through the most word-heavy moments.

The sets and costumes of Kathleen Ankers are simple and imaginative and never obtrusive. The set for the courtroom is particularly practical and tasteful.

On the debit side of the ledger it must be noted that there is a large hunk in the middle of the show which sags noticeably; at least half the characters are present only because Dickens made them famous, and they are held together by an almost non-existent plot.

But all this is more than compensated for, in my opinion, by a highly rewarding and truly professional production. I had a good time.

"MR. PICKWICK"

Play by Stanley Young, adapted from incidents in Charles Dickens' "The Pickwick Papers"; staged by John Burrell; designed by Kathleen Ankers; presented by The Playwrights' Company at the Plymouth Theatre, September 17, 1952. The cast:

Mr. Pickwick.....George Howe
Mr. Tupman..Earl Montgomery
Mr. Snodgrass.....
Anthony Kemble Cooper
Mr. Winkle.....Derek Tansley
Mrs. Bardell....Norah Howard
Mrs. Cluppins..Lucie Lancaster
Sam Weller.....Clive Revill
Tommy.....Richard Case
Mr. Buzfuz...Jacques Aubuchon
Mrs. Weller....Philippa Bevans
Mr. Weller.....Louis Hector
Mr. Stiggins.....Basil Howes
Mr. Jingle.....Nigel Green
Mary.....Sarah Marshall
Mrs. Leo Hunter.....
Estelle Winwood
Joe.....C. K. Alexander
Mr. Wardle.....Neil Fitzgerald
Miss Emily Wardle..Jean Cooke
Miss Isabella Wardle....
Dolores Pigott
Miss Rachel Wardle.....
Nydia Westman
Mr. Perker.....Kurt Richards
Wilberforce.....Wallace Acton
Justice.....William Podmore

DAILY NEWS

September 18, 1952

'Mr. Pickwick' Colorful, Funny, Loose-Jointed, Very Well Acted

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Stanley Young has an affectionate and flavorsome comedy in "Mr. Pickwick," and last evening at the Plymouth Theatre it was given a colorful and humorous performance. If the play is fragmentary and discursive—which it certainly is—the blame rests more with Dickens than with Young. When Charles Dickens wrote his most comical book and called it "The Pickwick Papers," he knew what he was about. He could not call it a novel and name it "Samuel Pickwick," because it was a great collection of oddments very tenuously connected—a series of sketches, burlesques, anecdotes and jokes tossed together and properly called papers.

This new Playwrights' Company production of "Mr. Pickwick" should lure to the Plymouth all Dickens devotees, for it assembles on one stage two dozen of the great writer's oddest and most moon-struck characters, including Sam Weller and his father, the jaunty Alfred Jingle, Buzfuz the lawyer, Miss Wardle the collector of moths (day moths only, because she is a maiden lady and does not go out at night), the fat boy Joe and Mrs. Leo Hunter, a Nineteenth Century combination of Perle Mesta and Jennie Grossinger.

Six Loose Scenes.

The comedy may be less alluring to people who have no particular sentiment toward Pickwick and his companions, or who want their plays neatly wrapped in compact, symmetrical packages. Nevertheless, I'd like to suggest attendance at "Mr. Pickwick," for it contains many hilarious scenes and many admirable performances.

For what there is of his plot, Young has fastened together six scenes. In the first, Pickwick and his fellow travelers are introduced at the moment they decide to embark on their aimless journey by coach to "observe life," and Pickwick haplessly makes his landlady think he has proposed to her. He also engages the redoubtable Sam Weller as his manservant.

Howe a Fine Pickwick.

In the second scene, Pickwick & Co. arrive at an inn in Chatham, where they encounter Jingle, the Wardle family and Minister Stiggins, the teetotaller who is always drunk. Next day they are dragged off to the breakfast garden party of Mrs. Hunter, the celebrity hound. The plot thickens a bit—but not too much or perhaps not even enough—when the voyageurs return to the inn and Pickwick finds that Jingle is trying to run off with Miss Wardle.

By now the law — a suit for breach of promise brought by his landlady — has caught up with Pickwick, and he finds himself in court as a defendant. This scene, though occasionally witty and funny as it considers British jurisprudence, is longer than it is worth. And, finally, a new Pickwick — a man of courage and action—finds himself in prison and has never enjoyed life more.

George Howe is admirable in the title role, and so is Clive Revill as Sam Weller. One of my favorite performances is by Louis Hector as Sam's father, and another comic gem is Basil Howes' tippling parson. As one should expect, Estelle Winwood and Nydia Westman are delightful as the domineering Mrs. Hunter and the maidenly Miss Wardle. Miss Winwood's recital of the ode to an expiring frog is irresistible, and Miss Westman's virginal reaction to a peck on the cheek is a little bit of art.

There are many others in the company who should be mentioned, including Nigel Green as the outlandish Jingle and Jacques Aubuchon as a lawyer. With so very many in the cast, John Burrell has had a great problem directing the play so that people don't stand around too much, and he has succeeded reasonably well. Kathleen Ankers' sets are modestly atmospheric but none too solid, and last night the lighting was uncertain. However, Miss Ankers' costumes are superb.

The New York Times

September 18, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Dipping back into the random humors of the Pickwick Papers, Stanley Young has brought us a thoroughly delightful play. He calls it "Mr. Pickwick," adding that it is "freely drawn from incidents" in the original work of Charles Dickens. Acted with extravagance and fondness by a most ingratiating company, it was put on last evening at the Plymouth before an audience that was seeing the first genuinely professional work of the season.

When Dickens was scribbling away at "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" he set his future dramatists a problem by dashing helter-skelter over the English landscape and providing no coherent plot. Mr. Young has obligingly pulled some order out of the Pickwick pilgrimages by centering his play around the importunate affairs of Mrs. Bardell and by involving Mr. Pickwick with that over-anxious spinster, Rachel Wardle.

* * *

This has required playing fast and loose with some of the basic facts of the Dickens history, and it makes Mr. Pickwick rather more amorous than he was originally. The next meeting of the Pickwick Club will have to decide whether Mr. Young will have to be brought up on charges. Probably the members will forgive him. For he has caught perfectly the innocent, cheerful, amiable, satirical comedy that Dickens invented out of his own good nature. "England is filled with incorrigible characters," Mr. Pickwick remarks affectionately after he has observed life on his travels. They are not only incorrigible; they are sociable and gregarious. And they are also about the most refreshing people we have had on a New York stage for a long time.

Say a word of particular thanks to John Burrell for the lively staging and to the actors for playing with so much taste and gusto. In this column's opinion the performance might be more intensely stylized in the spirit of caricature, for some of the acting seems almost too reasonable for Dickens' racy fantastifications. But there is no point in staring a gift-horse out of countenance. George Howe's Mr. Pickwick—dignified but friendly—is a very engaging figure with a kindly, bespectacled face that looks remarkably like our own Marc Connelly. When Mr. Pickwick loses his temper in the courtroom his inadequate fury is astonishing and funny.

* * *

Nigel Green's Alfred Jingle, the charlatan who talks headline English, puts a current of electricity through the whole performance. Mr. Green is an imposing figure and he acts his villainies with a breadth and imperiousness that pull the play together. As Mrs. Leo Hunter, poetess of the expiring frog, Estelle Winwood gives a wonderfully droll performance, pointing up the lines with regal mountebankery.

Jacques Aubuchon's portly and bombastic Buzfuz, Clive Revill's loquacious and loyal Sam Weller, Louis Hector's sardonic Tony Weller, Basil Howes' tipsy, tattered parson, Nydia Westman's anxiously genteel Rachel Wardle, Neil Fitzgerald's worldly Mr. Wardle, Norah Howard's coquettish Mrs. Bardell, Philippa Bevans termagant Mrs. Weller—these are all enjoyable performances in the spirit of pure comedy.

But no one in the long cast is lacking in appreciation and understanding of the guileless good humor of Dickens' cartoon of life in general and English society in particular. Kathleen Anker's genially scrawled scenery is also amusing in the vein of old-fashioned comedy. There are no problems in "Mr. Pickwick"; in fact, there are no villains except one in a story-book style. Mr. Young's leisurely comedy looks like an item out of a lost era of good feeling. Done with skill and humorous sensibility, it makes things look a lot brighter in this troubled neighborhood.

Daily Mirror

September 18, 1952

'Mr. Pickwick' at Plymouth A Disappointment

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Having a particular fondness for Charles Dickens' "Pickwick Papers," we have been looking forward eagerly to "Mr. Pickwick." This is a free adaptation by Stanley Young of the humorous classic. But after last evening at the Plymouth Theatre, we are somewhat crushed in spirit.

Though the Playwrights' Company has brought over from England a number of distinguished actors to play it, and John Burrell, a titan of the Old Vic, to stage it, the results are disappointing. Every Dickens aficionado has his own conception of the portly, amiable and courageous Mr. Pickwick and his circle. So it is difficult for anyone to translate these superb characters into theatrical terms satisfactory to all.

Young has built his play about the meeting of Pickwick's literary and scientific club, its hectic experiences at Chatham, the garden party at Mrs. Leo Hunter's and Pickwick's ordeal at the hands of his misguided landlady, Mrs. Bardell. These episodes should supply rewarding comedy in abundance, and yet, for us, they don't.

Burrell has staged the play with broad strokes, some of them bordering on slapstick, and has failed to blend them all into a triumphant whole. We happen to like robust acting and think there is too little of it today, but we don't like robust acting that smacks of absurd eccentricity.

And we found the latter in the performances of Nigel Green, as the villainous Mr. Jingle, and Basil Howes, as the tippling Mr. Stiggins. George Howe, on the other hand, etched Pickwick with restraint and some of the affection he deserves. Clive Revill and Louis Hector are excellent as the Wellers, son and father.

Edna Best and Herbert Marshall should be proud this morning of their daughter, Sarah. She is most attractive as the coquettish maid, Mary. Tall, graceful and pretty, she promises to carry on ably the admirable acting traditions of her parents. Oh yes, there is a first-rate contribution by Neil Fitzgerald as the gentlemanly Mr. Wardle.

A salute also is due Kathleen Ankers for her period settings and costumes.

The first-night audience was an amazing and disturbing one. It was evident that many of the customers had arrived at the Plymouth determined to enjoy themselves and let those about them know it. They indulged in frenzied cackles and lusty applause throughout. Their peculiar noise-making prevented our hearing much of the dialogue.

But from what we did hear, it was just as well. For henceforth we shall relish "The Pickwick Papers" from the vantage point of an easy chair at home, or through the solo art of Emlyn Williams. At one point in the proceedings, a character aptly remarked: "Put this little incident out of your mind," or words to that effect. That's good advice, and we'll take it.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

September 18, 1952

'Mr. Pickwick' Is Episodic

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night's theatrical entry, "Mr. Pickwick," suggests that while the movies may focus successfully on the episodic delights of Charles Dickens' novels, the theater is by no means a happy place for them.

The current play takes a series of incidents, and strings them together without much shape beyond the fact that the trial at the finish springs from the misunderstanding at the start.

Dickens' prose and conversation, on paper, have vitality and wit. Transmitted to the stage his dialogue is not very actable. Attention focuses too long on single characters, while others have to hold their peace and wait. There is rarely any give and take in the vocal expressions. Instead the scenes consist of cues that inspire individual characters to speechifying.

Action Lacks Gusto.

The present production is underplayed, you might almost say unacted, to such an extent that the action rarely has any gusto.

The play opens with the Pickwick Club setting out to see the world and being held up only long enough for Mr. P. to confuse his landlady into thinking he has proposed. There is an offstage election and a series of misunderstandings at an inn, then a garden party which also has a way of seeming juiciest offstage.

In the second act, Mr. Pickwick's romance gets more involved. Then there is the trial for breach of promise, not as witty as it should be, and finally the